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CHRISTIANITY AND THE INDIGENOUS THOUGHT OF INDIA

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The problem that confronts the Christian missionary in his efforts to bring to the people of India that help and inspiration which it is the office of Christianity to impart to all people is a many-sided and complex one. It is no simple matter of the exportation of the “goods”—even the moral and intellectual “goods”—of one land to another, and, though after the manner of Jesus it may be described in terms of leaven and the lump, these words rather suggest the vital nature of the process than adequately describe its complexity. It is necessary, in the first place, to remember that the Christian truth which is to be made vital in Indian thought and life is not the same as that interpretation of Christian truth which the West has elaborated through many centuries in consonance with its own mental bias and intellectual prepossessions. The latter expresses fully the western emphasis upon life, and the western, especially the Anglo-Saxon, type of mind is more nearly antipodal than any other to that of India; and the hemisphere of life which it has cultivated is complementary to that of India.

It should not be supposed therefore that our duty is to carry bodily our western thought and life to that land where it could not possibly be intelligible, congenial, or useful. The distinguished Indian Christian, Kali Charran Bannerjee, significantly emphasized, in an address to missionaries, the supreme fact that what India requires today is not “adjectival Christianity but the substantive thing.” Indian Christians are coming to feel this more and more; and the non-Christian educated people of India are most pronounced in this conviction. It is essential Christianity that must be related to Hindu thought and life; and there is in the

religious speculation, the dogmatic assertion, and the ecclesiastical assumption of our western Christianity much less that is of the very essence of our faith than we are wont to think.

In this task of relating Christianity to Indian thought we have a decided advantage over those who have gone before. The science of comparative religion not only helps us to see what is good in other faiths, but also enables us to realize the partial, local, and inadequate interpretation which any one nation or people has given to our own faith. And our broader sympathies and wider knowledge of men save us from thrusting our prejudices and dogmatic assertions upon non-Christian peoples, as often happened in the past. To illustrate: Two centuries ago the Bible was first translated into a language of the Far East, the Tamil language. The attitude of mind of Protestant Christians, at that time, toward the religions of India was one of pronounced hostility. They regarded these faiths as of the devil, and even their terminology as a thing to be avoided so far as possible. The consequence was that the Holy Scriptures were translated in such a way that popular Hindu terms, which had definite and strong significance to the people, were scrupulously avoided, and other words, less vital in the thought and life of the people, were substituted for them in the Tamil translation. The missionary body today would be most happy to change these terms and to utilize far more largely popular Hindu terminology to express the fundamentals of our faith, were it not that the Bible has already (after two centuries of circulation) largely determined our Christian terminology, so that it would be unwise today seriously to change the same, however much more valuable and useful new terms might be to non-Christian peoples.

The modern unrest of India is in no small degree the dissatisfaction of that land with our western intellectual and religious arrogance, which strives to lead all men to think in our channels and to emphasize our western ideals and virtues. In the impartation of Christian truth, we should not therefore emphasize our occidental experience and elaboration of our faith. That type will never strongly appeal to or prevail in the East. Yet we should not try to eliminate *entirely* our western type of thought

and life; for it will have a value as a corrective of the oriental and is complementary to the same. The East and West must find their place in the interpretation of Christian truth. It is only in the full blending of these two that our faith is to find its perfect expression.

The East and West without a breath
Mix'd their dim light like life and death
To broaden into boundless day.

The work of the Christian teacher in India may be considered, first, in reference to the indigenous thought and life of that land. It is of vital importance that the attitude of the missionary toward this thought should be intelligent. It is a lamentable fact that few missionaries, and fewer Indian Christians, are thoroughly familiar with Indian thought. There lingers still the old conviction that indigenous thought and life in India are unworthy of our consideration and are of the devil. No European should be allowed to teach Christian truth in the institutions of that land who has not mastered Hindu thought, at least in some of its important ramifications. In our Christian educational work in that land such a knowledge is second only to a thorough knowledge of our own faith. No people on earth have engaged more, and for a longer time, in religious speculation, or have thought out more patiently and devoutly the relations between God and man than have the people of India; and no one is worthy to be a teacher of those people in divine things who is not familiar with the thoughts of God as they have been revealed in past ages to the sages of that land.

It should also be thoroughly sympathetic. It must not trifle with the teaching of many centuries, which is not only hoary with age but is also most pathetically sincere and patient. It is necessary to know that India has produced some of the highest religious speculations, the profoundest philosophies, and the most remarkable systems of ontology that the world has known. These have been the thought-pabulum and the spiritual nourishment of this great people for millenniums: One should not deal harshly or unsympathetically with these spiritual aspirations and yearnings of that people. He must be able to see what is in them that has

rendered them, in a sense, adequate to the need of, and expressive of the deepest mind of, a people for so many centuries.

It must also be dominantly constructive in its character. Even today many missionaries believe that they have been sent to the East to tear down and trample under foot these systems of thought and spiritual aspirations which, they say, are of the evil one. Rather is it necessary to regard them as containing many vital and eternal truths which must be conserved—stones out of the old temple of Hinduism to be placed in the new and abiding temple of the Christian faith. Some of the most fundamental teachings of ancient and modern India are among the eternal verities of religion to be valued and preserved both for their own sake and also for the reason that they have been cherished in that land from time immemorial and have revealed the mold of the mind and heart of the East during all this time.

Moreover, many of these truths only require to be exalted and taken out of their base setting and chastened and re-expressed in modern terms in order to be properly related to Christian truth. Pantheism itself, which has wrought more evil for India than any other teaching of the land, is India's profoundest and most powerful doctrine. It has wrought more for India than all other teachings combined in the type of character which it has produced and in its influence upon the faith of which it is the foundation stone. Yet pantheism is only a perverted truth. It is an over-emphasis upon the all-important doctrine of divine immanence. Just as the West so exalted God that He transcended their highest thought, so the East has drawn God so near to them that they are unable to see him and know him. It reveals marvelously the type of oriental mind which has well been described as "the mind of a God-intoxicated people." There are elements in this doctrine which must be conserved, through which our faith can be made the more vital and helpful to the oriental. Indeed the new monistic conception which is rapidly becoming basal to our western theological thought reveals the growing readiness of the western mind to compromise with the dominant Vedantic thought of India at this point. I know of no more radical change of base in western religious thought during the centuries than this of the recent

acceptance of some of the leading contentions of eastern pantheism. Nor do I know of any more serious danger which besets our modern theology than that which is incident to the domestication of this monistic idea. There are already indications which tend to prove that the two supreme evils of pantheism—the obliteration both of the personality of God and of the ethical responsibility of man—are invading the realm of our western dogmatic thought. The supreme test of our western sanity must be found in our ability to extract from pantheism its honey and to reject its poison—the poison which has paralyzed Indian thought and life for thirty centuries.

In like manner the doctrine of *Karma*, which is so all-pervasive and convincing in the thought and life of Hindus and Buddhists alike, is but a twisted and distorted expression of the fundamental Christian truth of the universality and remorselessness of the moral law in God's universe. It needs to be chastened and properly related to the fundamental Christian doctrine of grace in order to acquire permanent value in our religion.

Some of these thoughts, which are indigenous in India, are definitely preparatory to the higher Christian truth. This is essentially so of the Vaishnavite doctrine of faith (*bhakti*), which indeed may have been originally adopted from Christianity in the third century of our era and which is the nearest approach, among the teachings of that faith, to that of our own divine religion. When that doctrine which is now so popular in India has been cleansed from its impurities, released from its association with unworthy gods, and brought into intimate relationship with our Christ, it will accomplish more, perhaps, in making our faith indigenous in India than any other doctrine that has ever been taught there.

The life of the Indian people will also require proper consideration in the relating of the indigenous life of that land to our faith. There is much that is exceedingly low and debasing in the life of the Indian people. Hinduism has definitely cultivated such, or at least is responsible for most of it. Yet there is a type and an ideal of life and aspiration there which definitely belongs to that people and which is strangely complementary to the western ideals of life which have been so identified in our mind and theirs

with Christian demands and ideals. The West has so exalted and given supreme emphasis to the aggressive and positive types of character that these have become highly enthroned among our cardinal virtues; so that we look with suspicion and contempt upon that other hemisphere of life which does not reveal these. We speak of the "mild Hindu" and regard him as hardly worthy of our respect. We forget that the passive virtues, which have shone with such exclusive luster in India, are as truly a part of Christian life, as taught and exemplified by Christ, as are the assertive, aggressive virtues which have been so emphasized by us. They, for instance, accept with us the whole of the second table of the Decalogue; but their emphasis upon the separate members of that Decalogue is entirely different from ours. For instance, patience, with them, is a supreme virtue of God and man; impatience is the grossest sin. We, on the other hand, look at impatience as a mere foible and ordinarily think of patience itself as hardly more than a weakness of character. In our endeavor to explain our Lord's teaching concerning non-resistance in the Sermon on the Mount we are always in danger of explaining it away. The oriental, on the other hand, finds no difficulty in accepting with perfect literalness that teaching of our Lord because it appeals to the deepest ideals of his oriental character. We must remember that the other hemisphere of life, of virtues, of ideals, is complementary to that which we have so assiduously and excessively cultivated in the West. And we must understand the real value of the non-resisting, patient, enduring life of the East, that we may exalt it adequately and relate it properly to our own type of life. The Christian teacher, realizing this relationship, should aim to present to his students a full-orbed type of Christian life, embracing the eastern and the western emphasis.

The work of the missionary may also be considered in reference to Christian truth itself. This truth should be separated, so far as may be, from its western setting. This, of course, reveals a crucial difficulty in the work of the man of the Occident in the Orient. The truth which he has inherited is (to him) so inseparable from its western coloring and his inherited expression of it that he easily identifies the thing itself with its expression. He

can never fully disengage himself from his inheritance and bias of thought and life; but he must always aim to lay aside his prepossessions and bring to his students, as far as possible, that aspect of our religion which will best appeal to them and which will most quickly develop within them the noblest traits of life and character possible.

He must make Christ the center and the supreme test of his teaching. Jesus is the world-Christ. He is at least as oriental as he is occidental. He appeals to India today as no other incarnation of life ever did in that land. He has already captivated the mind and imagination of the leaders and the cultivated men of India. I know of nothing more encouraging to the Christian worker in India today than the way in which the Christ ideal of life is captivating the minds of the educated men of India. Many thousands of them see in Christ the first and only perfectly incarnated ideal of life that India has ever known. For the first time in all the history of that land and people their eyes are turned to one whose example is perfect and following whom they will reach the highest attainment and expression of human life and character. Jesus, in his words and life, is the essential Christianity and is what India supremely needs. He should be the center and the circumference of the teacher's message in the Christian schools of that land. Whatever of indigenous thought and life is worth conserving in Hinduism finds fulfilment and realization in Him. India's redemption must be found definitely in Him. The ideals of life, the fulfilment of all truth, and the realization of immortality—he incarnates all these, because he is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Those parts of our sacred Scriptures which reveal him should have precedence and have all but exclusive use in the pulpit and the classroom. This is pre-eminently desirable in the primary and lower classes where an extended course of religious training is impossible.

While importance should indeed be given to the universality of Christ's life and teaching, the oriental aspect of both should find clear and definite enunciation and emphasis.

Care should be exercised in appointing only qualified men to impart Christian truth to the people of India. And, among the

qualifications, a thorough belief in the uniqueness of our faith and of our Lord is absolutely essential. A man who is not grounded in the essentials of Christianity, and who has not found in Christ himself a new life and joy, will not be prepared to do this work. Perhaps there is no one thing so fundamentally important to this Christian teacher in India today as a possession of the experience of the power of the living and reigning Christ within his own soul. It is of supreme consequence to him and to his work that he know, in the intimacies of his daily life, the One whose messenger he is and whom he tries by word and example to make known to his students. Moreover, a fair acquaintance with the life and the language of the people is of great importance to the teacher. It is highly undesirable that men just imported from the West should be given this sacred function of teaching the people, young or old, while knowing practically nothing about their inherited faith and their oriental type of life.